



San Diego Rapid Response Network Migrant Shelter Services | Shelter Operations

The following is an excerpt from Jewish Family Service of San Diego's upcoming white paper on San Diego Rapid Response Network Migrant Shelter Services. The full white paper will be linked here when available, as well as published on www.rapidresponsesd.org and www.jfssd.org.

In October 2018, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services began as an emergency response, grassroots effort among faith-based organizations and nonprofit service providers to temporarily shelter and coordinate travel for vulnerable asylum-seeking families released from federal immigration custody. Within a few short months, the system became a fully coordinated 24/7 operation between JFSSD, its partners, local immigration officials and State leaders that now serves approximately 200 people per day.

Migrants from all over the world – including Central and South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East – come to the U.S.-Mexico border in search of protection. They arrive at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services after being processed at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, released from U.S. Border Patrol stations, or enrolled in Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) alternatives to detention program.

Although many people come through Tijuana, Mexico, and the surrounding area, others are transported to San Diego by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) from other parts of the border via bus or airplane. This lateral transfer of asylum seekers is carried out as part of CBP's operational priorities and without consideration of SDRRN or other non-governmental organizations' (NGO) respite shelter capacity.

People generally stay between 24 and 72 hours in SDRRN's non-congregate shelter – which as a result of the COVID pandemic, consists of hotel rooms for individuals and families, operated in partnership with the State of California. During their stay, three meals a day are provided to guests and urgent medical needs are triaged and treated. Additionally, guests have access to case management services, "Know Your Rights" presentations and *pro se* legal assistance. Guests also receive fresh sets of clothing, new shoes and/or shoelaces (which are often removed/taken away in migrant detention facilities), travel care packages with snacks, entertainment for small children, and petty cash for purchasing food and other immediate needs while traveling to their final destinations.

At SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services, staff and volunteers welcome people and provide an initial assessment to identify needs. Simultaneous interpretation is available by staff for Spanish, Haitian Creole, Ukrainian, Russian, and Arabic speakers and via a language line for any other language spoken.

UC San Diego Health is on site for medical screenings and stabilization. JFSSD partners with organizations and donors to provide clothing, including warm clothes for those traveling on to colder

regions of the U.S. and religious dress like burkas and hijabs to replace those that Customs Border Protection (CBP) confiscated.

Travel Coordination

More than 98% of the people sheltered by JFSSD have a point of contact – such as a family member or friend – in the U.S. outside of San Diego. This makes the coordination of travel key to ensure they reach those points of contact essential to the SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services operation. Prior to guests' travel, JFSSD also provides information about community support in their final destinations that can help them build stability while pursuing their legal cases.

Frequently, in addition to logistical challenges, people fleeing for their lives usually lack the financial resources to buy plane tickets in an expedited fashion, and even bus travel can be out of reach as routes the U.S. bus system is recovering from the pandemic. JFS works with each guest and their capacity to purchase their travel, either fully or partially covering their travel. Where guests do not have the financial resources to pay for their onward movement, JFS works with philanthropic partners to assist. JFSSD also established a first-of-its-kind partnership with United Airlines to assist with the onward movement of its guests.

Security Protocols

To maintain secure and safe operations at SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services' hotel shelters and travel center, around-the-clock security is visibly present and has proven to be absolutely vital to the operation. With much of the country inundated with anti-immigration and antisemitic rhetoric, the need for security presence to ensure the safety of shelter guests, staff and volunteers is unfortunate, but critical.

The element of security allows staff to focus on serving the migrants in SDRRN's care and adds a level of comfort in their daily work. It also allows shelter managers the time needed to pre-plan in the event of a security threat or other type of incident and engage external partners such as law enforcement and emergency management in the planning process.

Without security present, shelter leadership would be forced to assume a role they might not be equipped to fill or result in a lack of preparation if an incident were to occur.

All security present are provided a high-level of operational context and are trained on cultural sensitivities and other considerations to be mindful of to ensure the most welcoming environment possible.

Operations during COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, while SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services operations were conducted from one congregate shelter setting, the location of the shelter itself changed many times throughout the years. Each location included spaces for medical screenings and triage, a kitchen and cafeteria/dining space, storage for donated clothing, shoes, toys, diapers and personal care items, office spaces for staff and volunteers, indoor and outdoor activity spaces, congregate sleeping areas, bathrooms and showers, and more.

The pandemic resulted in a significant reduction in the number of people served, as policies like Title 42 were put in place to prevent migrants from being allowed into the U.S. in the name of public health. During this period, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services staffing dropped to just three paid employees to assist the few migrants allowed into the U.S. due to various medical and legal exemptions.

COVID restrictions also limited the instances in which volunteers could be utilized. While JFSSD worked to keep volunteers engaged in other opportunities unrelated to the shelter, many were unable to return to their level of commitment prior to the pandemic. Because of this, JFSSD focused on building out its paid staff levels, recruiting candidates through online platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed, and reaching out to trusted partners to make referrals.

Once operations ramped back up, JFSSD and SDRRN worked closely with the State of California to coordinate non-congregate sleeping arrangements in hotel rooms where migrants stayed until a negative COVID test was confirmed. If an individual tested positive for COVID-19 while in SDRRN's care, they and every person they had been in close contact with, were quarantined based on current State COVID guidelines at a separate hotel, until they were cleared for travel.

To add capacity to its overall operations, SDRRN established a travel center, located in a space leased from the State of California, close to the hotel shelters. The travel center has congregate overnight space, a children's area and meals available for people who have a short-term wait before flying out to destinations where they will connect with family, friends or community support. JFSSD refers a very small percentage of guests without points of contact to support services in San Diego.

Post-pandemic, all asylum seekers continue to receive health screenings and stay in hotel rooms before travel, following all public health guidelines. Guests also have the option to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Once guests have been medically cleared of any communicable diseases or serious health complications that would prevent them from traveling, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services arranges bus or air travel for them to meet their loved ones across the U.S.

In the coming months, the shelter will transition from non-congregate hotel sheltering back to congregate sheltering as public health guidance changes and physical infrastructure becomes available.

Staffing & Volunteers

Staff

As with the rest of the operation, staffing for SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services began as a grassroots effort with JFSSD reaching out to the community, including partner organizations and local church congregations, asking for volunteers or candidates interested in paid positions to work to shelter abandoned migrant families. With the first few months, JFSSD had a paid staff of 20, with an additional 1,400 volunteers.

Today, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services has a dedicated staff of 100-plus who work alongside hundreds of volunteers to ensure all guests are assisted with dignity and compassion. Key staff positions include program directors and shelter managers to oversee daily operation of the hotel shelter sites and travel center; case managers and travel coordinators to ensure all guests needs are met; and administrative and finance managers to facilitate all necessary shelter logistics. While community partners are contacted about open positions in case of appropriate referrals, JFSSD relies on online platforms such as

Indeed and LinkedIn to find qualified applicants, utilizing features like virtual job fairs to expedite hiring for high-demand positions.

One of the identified best practices employed at the SDRRN Migrant Shelter operated by JFS is its integrated advocacy in parallel to the direct services it provides. Through the SDRRN partnership with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), guest intakes are reviewed to identify violations of rights such as mistreatment in detention or family separations, research these incidents, and produce reports to be rolled into various policy and legal documentation to further national advocacy efforts on these issues (see Advocacy).

Throughout the course of its work, JFSSD realized the importance of having managers and team leaders trained in trauma and emergency response to better provide support to frontline staff, who often hear stories and bear witness to the aftermath of guests' horrific experiences. The staffing structure includes one supervisor for every five staff members to ensure managers can have regular, meaningful touchpoints with staff on professional development and provide emotional support.

While staff receive a variety of trainings, including internal shelter procedures, first aid and CPR, managers also receive additional trainings in trauma, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution and more with the help of national partners, such as UNHCR, Save the Children and the National Conflict Resolution Center. An annual training plan is currently under development to equip shelter managers with more tools on how to lead in such a challenging environment effectively and compassionately.

Volunteers

Volunteers have been at the heart of SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services since the operation began in 2018, with very little proactive recruitment needed, due to the assistance from JFSSD's community partnerships. In fact, the operation was primarily volunteer supported up until the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, recognizing that while volunteer support is invaluable to the operation, the dynamic, flexible nature of this work is more conducive to a staff-led model. JFSSD has since increased its paid staff and uses fewer volunteers than in years past – though the operation continues to maintain a volunteer network of over 200 people.

JFSSD's current volunteer recruitment strategy targets local higher education institutions and nonprofits with similar interests in human rights and immigration. Program managers and volunteer coordinators regularly present to these organizations, sharing the challenges occurring at the southern border and the critical help provided by JFSSD. Once a prospective volunteer expresses interest, they are enrolled into a digital database to complete the necessary paperwork, background checks and HIPPA training. Phone interviews are also conducted. Once a candidate has cleared these steps, they are able to sign up for volunteer opportunities that interest them.

Every day, SDRRN Migrant Shelter Services volunteers work to enhance the experiences of shelter guests and help provide a safe, welcoming and warm environment in a variety of ways. Some volunteers help entertain children throughout the duration of their stay at the shelter/travel center so their parents can focus on other immediate needs, such as meetings with shelter case managers to determine legal assistance and travel arrangements.

Volunteers build relationships with these children and families and are a positive presence at the shelter, often preparing and leading age-appropriate and trauma-informed activities, games and projects, and fostering healthy interactions and play with other children.

Additional volunteer responsibilities include serving as on-call travel guides to assist shelter guests in navigating the overwhelming complexity of the bus station or airport, often escorting them directly to their gates;; maintaining cleanliness of the shelter and travel center's common spaces; assisting staff with sorting and organizing donated clothing and shoes; building bags of snacks for shelter guests to take with them on their travels; and a variety of other tasks that are determined based on the needs of the shelter at the time of volunteer arrival.